

Letter and enclosure from Alexander Graham Bell to Theodore Roosevelt, December 8, 1904, with transcript

December 8, 1904. Hon. Theodore Roosevelt, President of the United States, White House, Washington, D. C. Dear Sir:-

Allow me to direct your attention to the fact that Mr. Charles F. Thompson, a colored man in my employment, and his wife, both citizens of the United States, have suffered from exposure to a storm in consequence of exclusion from six of the public hotels of Sydney, Nova Scotia — a town where there is no special accommodation for colored persons. They have been put to unnecessary expense on account of doctor's bill and carriage hire, and in addition have been insulted on account of their color.

I beg to enclose a copy of a letter from Mr. Charles F. Thompson relating to his treatment in Sydney, published in the Sydney "Post" of November 28, 1904; and a copy of a letter from myself to the American Consul in Sydney dated December 1.

I would respectfully request that this case be examined into by the State Department with the object of affording protection to colored citizens of the United States in Canada.

Yours respectfully, (Signed) Alexander Graham Bell. 2 Enclosures

Baddeck, C. B., November 29, 1904.

At a meeting held in the office of Mr. Angus McInnis on Tuesday afternoon, November 29th, when a large gathering of the employees of Beinn Bhreagh were present, Mr. John G. Davidson read from the Sydney Post of November 28th a letter addressed to the Editor by Mr. Charles F. Thompson of Washington, D. C., setting forth his shameful treatment

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received at the hands of the Hotel keepers during a recent visit with his wife to the Iron City.

The letter was discussed in general by all present and a Committee of three, Messrs. Angus McInnis, Norman A. McIver and John G. Davidson, was appointed to draft a letter expressing the sincere regret over the circumstances outlined in Mr. Thompson's letter.

The Committee met the same evening at the home of Mr. Davidson and drafted the following letter on behalf of the public sentiment:-

Baddeck, C. B., November 29, 1904. Mr. Charles F. Thompson, Beinn Bhreagh, Victoria Co., Cape Breton, and of Washington, D. C., U. S. A. Dear Sir:-

Observing in the Sydney Morning Post of November 28th a letter from you, re the treatment you received at the Public Hotels on your recent visit to Sydney, we the undersigned do hereby express our sympathy for yourself and Mrs. Thompson, and regret very much the treatment to which you were subjected, being as it was on the evening of the severest rainstorm we have had for years.

We do not understand why a respectable couple (as we all know you to be) although colored, should be turned away from any Hotel, and we sincerely hope that you and Mrs. Thompson may long be spared to spend many summers on Canadian soil and receive treatment from the hands of the public that a gentleman of your esteem so well deserves.

Yours sincerely,

(Copy) December 1, 1904. Hon. M. E. West, American Consul, Sydney, C. B. Dear Sir:-

Allow me to direct your attention to a letter published in the Sydney Post of Monday, November 28th, entitled "Color Line Under the British Flag", written by Mr. Charles F. Thompson of Washington, D. C. — a citizen of the United States — relating to the

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exclusion of himself and wife from six of the public hotels of Sydney on account of his color. I

I know Mr. Thompson very well as he has been in my employment for about twenty years, if not more. He is an upright, conscientious man in whom I have the highest confidence. He has traveled with me in Norway, Sweden, Denmark, Holland, France, Italy and Great Britain, as well as in Japan and the Hawaiian Islands, and never outside of his own country has he been discriminated against on account of his color except in Sydney, Cape Breton Island — at least so far as I know.

However one may deplore the existence of the color line in certain parts of the United States, we have hotels there specially for colored people, so that the exclusion of a respectable colored man from a public hotel in our country does not work the hardship it does in Sydney. Exclusion from six of the hotels of Sydney resulted in turning these people out into the cold and wet, during one of the most severe storms of the season without a place where they could lay their heads. After several hours exposure to the storm they fortunately found at last one hotel — the Royal — where the Proprietor had humanity enough to receive them and give them shelter. Mr. Thompson is now lying ill in my house here as the result of the exposure, and his wife also is far from well.

I propose to call the attention of the State Department in Washington to the necessity of providing protection for colored citizens of the United States in Canada — so as to prevent the possibility of the repetition of another such outrage as this.

There is nothing in the appearance of Mr. and Mrs. Thompson, or in their manners or characters to justify exclusion from any hotel. There is so little of the negro in Mr. Thompson's appearance that he has often — in foreign countries — been taken for a Japanese, while his wife might well pass for Spanish.

Mr. Thompson is an educated man, the author of a book entitled "A Valet in Southern Italy". He is quite unassuming in his manners, is always well dressed, and gentlemanly

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in his appearance and behavior. He is possessed of ample means to satisfy any hotel proprietor, and he owns property in Sydney upon which he pays taxes. His good sense and gentlemanly instincts are well shown by the letter he has written to the Sydney Post. There are very few men I fancy who could have controlled themselves sufficiently to have written such a letter -so perfectly unobjectionable in matter and in manner — under similar circumstances of provocation. Mr. Thompson is surely more of a gentleman than the clerk of the Queens Hotel who is reported to have turned him 3 out, with the words:- “We can't take YOU here — get out — its against orders”. Under this provocation Mr. Thompson again showed the gentleman by making no reply whatever, but simply walking quietly out. He had previously sent his driver into the Queens Hotel to ascertain whether there were any vacant rooms; and, finding that there were, he entered the hotel to be met with the above rebuff.

Mr. Thompson is well-known in the town of Baddeck, as he has spent many summers here in my employment. The people of Baddeck have the highest regard for his character and capability and are indignant at the way he has been treated. They are also indignant that Sydney should, by this action, have cast a slur upon the fair name of Canada which has hitherto enjoyed the reputation of being a country where the colored man is received upon his merits — and not judged simply by the color of his skin.

At a meeting held at my house last night, a Committee was appointed, of which Mr. Arthur W. McCurdy of Baddeck is Chairman, to ascertain all the facts in this case and make a public protest.

On behalf of this Committee, Mr. Angus McInnis, the Manager of my Estate here, will visit Sydney to collect evidence concerning the outrage; and I have requested him to call upon you for assistance and advice, for I am sure that the Consul of the United States in Sydney will willingly co-operate with him, and with the Committee he represents, in resenting this wrong done to an American citizen, and in devising means for the prevention of similar outrages in the future.

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The Committee propose to take no action until they have quietly ascertained all the facts in the case, and it is just in this preliminary part of the investigation that your advice and help will be of special value.

It might perhaps be well to treat this communication as confidential until after the investigation has been concluded, but of course you are the best judge of the propriety of doing this.

I am My Dear Sir, Yours very sincerely, A Citizen of the United States.

P. S. My home address is 1331 Connecticut Avenue, Washington, D.C.